

SLOW VIOLENCE AND THE  
ENVIRONMENTALISM OF THE POOR

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## Introduction

I think of globalization like a light which shines brighter and brighter on a few people and the rest are in darkness, wiped out. They simply can't be seen. Once you get used to not seeing something, then, slowly, it's no longer possible to see it.

—Arundhati Roy

I think the economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest-wage country is impeccable and we should face up to that. . . . I've always thought that countries in Africa are vastly under polluted; their air quality is probably vastly inefficiently low compared to Los Angeles. . . . Just between you and me, shouldn't the World Bank be encouraging more migration of the dirty industries to the Least Developed Countries?

—Lawrence Summers, confidential World Bank memo,  
December 12, 1991

When Lawrence Summers, then president of the World Bank, advocated that the bank develop a scheme to export rich nation garbage, toxic waste, and heavily polluting industries to Africa, he did so in the calm voice of global managerial reasoning.<sup>1</sup> Such a scheme, Summers elaborated, would help correct an inefficient global imbalance in toxicity. Underlying his plan is an overlooked but crucial subsidiary benefit that he

outlined: offloading rich-nation toxins onto the world's poorest continent would help ease the growing pressure from rich-nation environmentalists who were campaigning against garbage dumps and industrial effluent that they condemned as health threats and found aesthetically offensive. Summers thus rationalized his poison-redistribution ethic as offering a double gain: it would benefit the United States and Europe economically, while helping appease the rising discontent of rich-nation environmentalists. Summers' arguments assumed a direct link between aesthetically unsightly waste and Africa as an out-of-sight continent, a place remote from green activists' terrain of concern. In Summers' win-win scenario for the global North, the African recipients of his plan were triply discounted: discounted as political agents, discounted as long-term casualties of what I call in this book "slow violence," and discounted as cultures possessing environmental practices and concerns of their own. I begin with Summers' extraordinary proposal because it captures the strategic and representational challenges posed by slow violence as it impacts the environments—and the environmentalism—of the poor.

Three primary concerns animate this book, chief among them my conviction that we urgently need to rethink—politically, imaginatively, and theoretically—what I call "slow violence." By slow violence I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility. We need, I believe, to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales. In so doing, we also need to engage the representational, narrative, and strategic challenges posed by the relative invisibility of slow violence. Climate change, the thawing cryosphere, toxic drift, biomagnification, deforestation, the radioactive aftermaths of wars, acidifying oceans, and a host of other slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes present formidable representational obstacles that can hinder our efforts to mobilize and act decisively. The long dyings—the staggered and staggeringly discounted casualties, both human and ecological that result from war's toxic aftermaths or

climate change—are underrepresented in strategic planning as well as in human memory.

Had Summers advocated invading Africa with weapons of mass destruction, his proposal would have fallen under conventional definitions of violence and been perceived as a military or even an imperial invasion. Advocating invading countries with mass forms of slow-motion toxicity, however, requires rethinking our accepted assumptions of violence to include slow violence. Such a rethinking requires that we complicate conventional assumptions about violence as a highly visible act that is newsworthy because it is event focused, time bound, and body bound. We need to account for how the temporal dispersion of slow violence affects the way we perceive and respond to a variety of social afflictions—from domestic abuse to posttraumatic stress and, in particular, environmental calamities. A major challenge is representational: how to devise arresting stories, images, and symbols adequate to the pervasive but elusive violence of delayed effects. Crucially, slow violence is often not just attritional but also exponential, operating as a major threat multiplier; it can fuel long-term, proliferating conflicts in situations where the conditions for sustaining life become increasingly but gradually degraded.

Politically and emotionally, different kinds of disaster possess unequal heft. Falling bodies, burning towers, exploding heads, avalanches, volcanoes, and tsunamis have a visceral, eye-catching and page-turning power that tales of slow violence, unfolding over years, decades, even centuries, cannot match. Stories of toxic buildup, massing greenhouse gases, and accelerated species loss due to ravaged habitats are all cataclysmic, but they are scientifically convoluted cataclysms in which casualties are postponed, often for generations. In an age when the media venerate the spectacular, when public policy is shaped primarily around perceived immediate need, a central question is strategic and representational: how can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and that star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world? How can we turn the long emergencies of slow violence into stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political intervention, these emergencies whose repercussions have given rise to some of the most critical challenges of our time?

This book's second, related focus concerns the environmentalism of the poor, for it is those people lacking resources who are the principal casualties of slow violence. Their unseen poverty is compounded by the invisibility of the slow violence that permeates so many of their lives. Our media bias toward spectacular violence exacerbates the vulnerability of ecosystems treated as disposable by turbo-capitalism while simultaneously exacerbating the vulnerability of those whom Kevin Bales, in another context, has called "disposable people."<sup>2</sup> It is against such conjoined ecological and human disposability that we have witnessed a resurgent environmentalism of the poor, particularly (though not exclusively) across the so-called global South. So a central issue that emerges is strategic: if the neoliberal era has intensified assaults on resources, it has also intensified resistance, whether through isolated site-specific struggles or through activism that has reached across national boundaries in an effort to build translocal alliances.

"The poor" is a compendious category subject to almost infinite local variation as well as to fracture along fault lines of ethnicity, gender, race, class, region, religion, and generation. Confronted with the militarization of both commerce and development, impoverished communities are often assailed by coercion and bribery that test their cohesive resilience. How much control will, say, a poor hardwood forest community have over the mix of subsistence and market strategies it deploys in attempts at adaptive survival? How will that community negotiate competing definitions of its own poverty and long-term wealth when the guns, the bulldozers, and the moneymen arrive? Such communities typically have to patch together threadbare improvised alliances against vastly superior military, corporate, and media forces. As such, impoverished resource rebels can seldom afford to be single-issue activists: their green commitments are seamed through with other economic and cultural causes as they experience environmental threat not as a planetary abstraction but as a set of inhabited risks, some imminent, others obscurely long term.

The status of environmental activism among the poor in the global South has shifted significantly in recent years. Where green or environmental discourses were once frequently regarded with skepticism as neocolonial, Western impositions inimical to the resource priorities of the poor in the global South, such attitudes have been tempered by the gathering visibility and credibility of environmental justice movements that have pushed

back against an antihuman environmentalism that too often sought (under the banner of universalism) to impose green agendas dominated by rich nations and Western NGOs. Among those who inhabit the frontlines of the global resource wars, suspicions that environmentalism is another guise of what Andrew Ross calls "planetary management" have not, of course, been wholly allayed.<sup>3</sup> But those suspicions have eased somewhat as the spectrum of what counts as environmentalism has broadened. Western activists are now more prone to recognize, engage, and learn from resource insurrections among the global poor that might previously have been discounted as not properly environmental.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, I believe that the fate of environmentalism—and more decisively, the character of the biosphere itself—will be shaped significantly in decades to come by the tension between what Ramachandra Guha and Joan Martinez-Alier have called "full-stomach" and "empty-belly" environmentalism.<sup>5</sup>

The challenge of visibility that links slow violence to the environmentalism of the poor connects directly to this book's third circulating concern—the complex, often vexed figure of the environmental writer-activist. In the chapters that follow I address not just literary but more broadly rhetorical and visual challenges posed by slow violence; however, I place particular emphasis on combative writers who have deployed their imaginative agility and worldly ardor to help amplify the media-marginalized causes of the environmentally dispossessed. I have sought to stress those places where writers and social movements, often in complicated tandem, have strategized against attritional disasters that afflict embattled communities. The writers I engage are geographically wide ranging—from various parts of the African continent, from the Middle East, India, the Caribbean, the United States, and Britain—and work across a variety of forms. Figures like Wangari Maathai, Arundhati Roy, Indra Sinha, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Abdulrahman Munif, Njabulo Ndebele, Nadine Gordimer, Jamaica Kincaid, Rachel Carson, and June Jordan are alive to the inhabited impact of corrosive transnational forces, including petro-imperialism, the megadam industry, outsourced toxicity, neocolonial tourism, antihuman conservation practices, corporate and environmental deregulation, and the militarization of commerce, forces that disproportionately jeopardize the livelihoods, prospects, and memory banks of the global poor. Among the writers I consider, some have testified in relative isolation, some have helped instigate movements

for environmental justice, and yet others, in aligning themselves with pre-existing movements, have given imaginative definition to the issues at stake while enhancing the public visibility of the cause.

Relations between movements and writers are often fraught and frictional, not least because such movements themselves are susceptible to fracture from both external and internal pressures.<sup>6</sup> That said, the writers I consider are enraged by injustices they wish to see redressed, injustices they believe they can help expose, silences they can help dismantle through testimonial protest, rhetorical inventiveness, and counterhistories in the face of formidable odds. Most are restless, versatile writers ready to pit their energies against what Edward Said called “the normalized quiet of unseen power.”<sup>7</sup> This normalized quiet is of particular pertinence to the hushed havoc and injurious invisibility that trail slow violence.

### Slow Violence

In this book, I have sought to address our inattention to calamities that are slow and long lasting, calamities that patiently dispense their devastation while remaining outside our flickering attention spans—and outside the purview of a spectacle-driven corporate media. The insidious workings of slow violence derive largely from the unequal attention given to spectacular and unspectacular time. In an age that venerates instant spectacle, slow violence is deficient in the recognizable special effects that fill movie theaters and boost ratings on TV. Chemical and radiological violence, for example, is driven inward, somatized into cellular dramas of mutation that—particularly in the bodies of the poor—remain largely unobserved, undiagnosed, and untreated. From a narrative perspective, such invisible, mutagenic theater is slow paced and open ended, eluding the tidy closure, the containment, imposed by the visual orthodoxies of victory and defeat.

Let me ground this point by referring, in conjunction, to Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* and Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*. In 1962 *Silent Spring* jolted a broad international public into an awareness of the protracted, cryptic, and indiscriminate casualties inflicted by dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT). Yet, just one year earlier, Fanon, in the opening pages of *Wretched of the Earth*, had comfortably invoked DDT as an affirmative metaphor for anticolonial violence: he called for a DDT-filled spray gun to be

wielded as a weapon against the “parasites” spread by the colonials’ Christian church.<sup>8</sup> Fanon’s drama of decolonization is, of course, studded with the overt weaponry whereby subjugation is maintained (“by dint of a great array of bayonets and cannons”) or overthrown (“by the searing bullets and bloodstained knives”) after “a murderous and decisive struggle between the two protagonists.”<sup>9</sup> Yet his temporal vision of violence—and of what Aimé Césaire called “the rendezvous of victory”—was uncomplicated by the concerns that an as-yet inchoate environmental justice movement (catalyzed in part by *Silent Spring*) would raise about lopsided risks that permeate the land long term, blurring the clean lines between defeat and victory, between colonial dispossession and official national self-determination.<sup>10</sup> We can certainly read Fanon, in his concern with land as property and as fount of native dignity, retrospectively with an environmental eye. But our theories of violence today must be informed by a science unavailable to Fanon, a science that addresses environmentally embedded violence that is often difficult to source, oppose, and once set in motion, to reverse.

Attritional catastrophes that overspill clear boundaries in time and space are marked above all by displacements—temporal, geographical, rhetorical, and technological displacements that simplify violence and underestimate, in advance and in retrospect, the human and environmental costs. Such displacements smooth the way for amnesia, as places are rendered irretrievable to those who once inhabited them, places that ordinarily pass unmourned in the corporate media. Places like the Marshall Islands, subjected between 1948 and 1958 to sixty-seven American atmospheric nuclear “tests,” the largest of them equal in force to 1,000 Hiroshima-sized bombs. In 1956 the Atomic Energy Commission declared the Marshall Islands “by far the most contaminated place in the world,” a condition that would compromise independence in the long term, despite the islands’ formal ascent in 1979 into the ranks of self-governing nations.<sup>11</sup> The island republic was still in part governed by an irradiated past: well into the 1980s its history of nuclear colonialism, long forgotten by the colonizers, was still delivering into the world “jellyfish babies”—headless, eyeless, limbless human infants who would live for just a few hours.<sup>12</sup>

If, as Said notes, struggles over geography are never reducible to armed struggle but have a profound symbolic and narrative component as well, and if, as Michael Watts insists, we must attend to the “violent geographies

of fast capitalism," we need to supplement both these injunctions with a deeper understanding of the slow violence of delayed effects that structures so many of our most consequential forgettings.<sup>13</sup> Violence, above all environmental violence, needs to be seen—and deeply considered—as a contest not only over space, or bodies, or labor, or resources, but also over time. We need to bear in mind Faulkner's dictum that "the past is never dead. It's not even past." His words resonate with particular force across landscapes permeated by slow violence, landscapes of temporal overspill that elude rhetorical cleanup operations with their sanitary beginnings and endings.<sup>14</sup>

Kwame Anthony Appiah famously asked, "Is the 'Post-' in 'Postcolonial' the 'Post-' in 'Postmodern'?" As environmentalists we might ask similarly searching questions of the "post" in postindustrial, post-Cold War, and postconflict.<sup>15</sup> For if the past of slow violence is never past, so too the post is never fully post: industrial particulates and effluents live on in the environmental elements we inhabit and in our very bodies, which epidemiologically and ecologically are never our simple contemporaries.<sup>16</sup> Something similar applies to so-called postconflict societies whose leaders may annually commemorate, as marked on the calendar, the official cessation of hostilities, while ongoing intergenerational slow violence (inflicted by, say, unexploded landmines or carcinogens from an arms dump) may continue hostilities by other means.

Ours is an age of onrushing turbo-capitalism, wherein the present feels more abbreviated than it used to—at least for the world's privileged classes who live surrounded by technological time-savers that often compound the sensation of not having enough time. Consequently, one of the most pressing challenges of our age is how to adjust our rapidly eroding attention spans to the slow erosions of environmental justice. If, under neoliberalism, the gulf between enclaved rich and outcast poor has become ever more pronounced, ours is also an era of enclaved time wherein for many speed has become a self-justifying, propulsive ethic that renders "uneventful" violence (to those who live remote from its attritional lethality) a weak claimant on our time. The attosecond pace of our age, with its restless technologies of infinite promise and infinite disappointment, prompts us to keep flicking and clicking distractedly in an insatiable—and often insensate—quest for quicker sensation.

The oxymoronic notion of slow violence poses a number of challenges: scientific, legal, political, and representational. In the long arc between the

emergence of slow violence and its delayed effects, both the causes and the memory of catastrophe readily fade from view as the casualties incurred typically pass untallied and unremembered. Such discounting in turn makes it far more difficult to secure effective legal measures for prevention, restitution, and redress. Casualties from slow violence are, moreover, out of sync not only with our narrative and media expectations but also with the swift seasons of electoral change. Politicians routinely adopt a "last in, first out" stance toward environmental issues, admitting them when times are flush, dumping them as soon as times get tight. Because preventative or remedial environmental legislation typically targets slow violence, it cannot deliver dependable electoral cycle results, even though those results may ultimately be life saving. Relative to bankable pocketbook actions—there'll be a tax rebate check in the mail next August—environmental payouts seem to lurk on a distant horizon. Many politicians—and indeed many voters—routinely treat environmental action as critical yet not urgent. And so generation after generation of two- or four-year cycle politicians add to the pileup of deferrable actions deferred. With rare exceptions, in the domain of slow violence "yes, but not now, not yet" becomes the *modus operandi*.

How can leaders be goaded to avert catastrophe when the political rewards of their actions will not accrue to them but will be reaped on someone else's watch decades, even centuries, from now? How can environmental activists and storytellers work to counter the potent political, corporate, and even scientific forces invested in immediate self-interest, procrastination, and dissembling? We see such dissembling at work, for instance, in the afterword to Michael Crichton's 2004 environmental conspiracy novel, *State of Fear*, wherein he argued that we needed twenty more years of data gathering on climate change before any policy decisions could be ventured.<sup>17</sup> Although the National Academy of Sciences had assured former president George W. Bush that humans were indeed causing the earth to warm, Bush shopped around for views that accorded with his own skepticism and found them in a private meeting with Crichton, whom he described as "an expert scientist."

To address the challenges of slow violence is to confront the dilemma Rachel Carson faced almost half a century ago as she sought to dramatize what she eloquently called "death by indirection."<sup>18</sup> Carson's subjects were biomagnification and toxic drift, forms of oblique, slow-acting violence that,

like climate change, pose formidable imaginative difficulties for writers and activists alike. In struggling to give shape to amorphous menace, both Carson and reviewers of *Silent Spring* resorted to a narrative vocabulary: one reviewer portrayed the book as exposing “the new, unplotted and mysterious dangers we insist upon creating all around us,”<sup>19</sup> while Carson herself wrote of “a shadow that is no less ominous because it is formless and obscure.”<sup>20</sup> To confront slow violence requires, then, that we plot and give figurative shape to formless threats whose fatal repercussions are dispersed across space and time. The representational challenges are acute, requiring creative ways of drawing public attention to catastrophic acts that are low in instant spectacle but high in long-term effects. To intervene representationally entails devising iconic symbols that embody amorphous calamities as well as narrative forms that infuse those symbols with dramatic urgency.

### Slow Violence and Structural Violence

Seven years after Rachel Carson turned our attention to the lethal mechanisms of “death by indirection,” Johan Galtung, the influential Norwegian mathematician and sociologist, coined the term “indirect or structural violence.”<sup>21</sup> Galtung’s theory of structural violence is pertinent here because some of his concerns overlap with the concerns that animate this book, while others help throw into relief the rather different features I have sought to highlight by introducing the term “slow violence.” Structural violence, for Galtung, stands in opposition to the more familiar personal violence that dominates our conceptions of what counts as violence per se.<sup>22</sup> Galtung was concerned, as I am, with widening the field of what constitutes violence. He sought to foreground the vast structures that can give rise to acts of personal violence and constitute forms of violence in and of themselves. Such structural violence may range from the unequal morbidity that results from a commodified health care system, to racism itself. What I share with Galtung’s line of thought is a concern with social justice, hidden agency, and certain forms of violence that are imperceptible.

In these terms, for example, we can recognize that the structural violence embodied by a neoliberal order of austerity measures, structural adjustment, rampant deregulation, corporate megamergers, and a widening gulf between rich and poor is a form of covert violence in its own right

that is often a catalyst for more recognizably overt violence. For an expressly environmental example of structural violence, one might cite Wangari Maathai’s insistence that the systemic burdens of national debt to the IMF and World Bank borne by many so-called developing nations constitute a major impediment to environmental sustainability.<sup>23</sup> So, too, feminist earth scientist Jill Schneiderman, one of our finest thinkers about environmental time, has written about the way in which environmental degradation may “masquerade as inevitable.”<sup>24</sup>

For all the continuing pertinence of the theory of structural violence and for all the modifications the theory has undergone, the notion bears the impress of its genesis during the high era of structuralist thinking that tended toward a static determinism. We see this, for example, in Galtung’s insistence that “structural violence is silent, it does not show—its is essentially static, it is the tranquil waters.”<sup>25</sup> In contrast to the static connotations of structural violence, I have sought, through the notion of slow violence, to foreground questions of time, movement, and change, however gradual. The explicitly temporal emphasis of slow violence allows us to keep front and center the representational challenges and imaginative dilemmas posed not just by imperceptible violence but by imperceptible change whereby violence is decoupled from its original causes by the workings of time. Time becomes an actor in complicated ways, not least because the temporal templates of our spectacle-driven, 24/7 media life have shifted massively since Galtung first advanced his theory of structural violence some forty years ago. To talk about slow violence, then, is to engage directly with our contemporary politics of speed.

Simply put, structural violence is a theory that entails rethinking different notions of causation and agency with respect to violent effects. Slow violence, by contrast, might well include forms of structural violence, but has a wider descriptive range in calling attention, not simply to questions of agency, but to broader, more complex descriptive categories of violence enacted slowly over time. The shift in the relationship between human agency and time is most dramatically evident in our enhanced understanding of the accelerated changes occurring at two scalar extremes—in the life-sustaining circuits of planetary biophysics and in the wired brain’s neural circuitry. The idea of structural violence predated both sophisticated contemporary ice-core sampling methods and the emergence of cyber

technology. My concept of slow violence thus seeks to respond both to recent, radical changes in our geological perception and our changing technological experiences of time.

Let me address the geological aspect first. In 2000, Paul Crutzen, the Nobel Prize-winning atmospheric chemist, introduced the term "the Anthropocene Age" (which he dated to James Watt's invention of the steam engine). Through the notion of "the Anthropocene Age," Crutzen sought to theorize an unprecedented epochal effect: the massive impact by the human species, from the industrial era onward, on our planet's life systems, an impact that, as his term suggests, is geomorphic, equal in force and in long-term implications to a major geological event.<sup>26</sup> Crutzen's attempt to capture the epochal scale of human activity's impact on the planet was followed by Will Steffen's elaboration, in conjunction with Crutzen and John McNeill, of what they dubbed the Great Acceleration, a second stage of the Anthropocene Age that they dated to the mid-twentieth century. Writing in 2007, Steffen et al. noted how "nearly three-quarters of the anthropogenically driven rise in CO<sub>2</sub> concentration has occurred since 1950 (from about 310 to 380 ppm), and about half of the total rise (48 ppm) has occurred in just the last 30 years."<sup>27</sup> The Australian environmental historian Libby Robin has put the case succinctly: "We have recently entered a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene. There is now considerable evidence that humanity has altered the biophysical systems of Earth, not just the carbon cycle . . . but also the nitrogen cycle and ultimately the atmosphere and climate of the whole globe."<sup>28</sup> What, then, are the consequences for our experience of time of this newfound recognition that we have inadvertently, through our unprecedented biophysical species power, inaugurated an Anthropocene Age and are now engaged in (and subject to) the hurtling changes of the Great Acceleration?

Over the past two decades, this high-speed planetary modification has been accompanied (at least for those increasing billions who have access to the Internet) by rapid modifications to the human cortex. It is difficult, but necessary, to consider simultaneously a geologically-paced plasticity, however relatively rapid, and the plasticity of brain circuits reprogrammed by a digital world that threatens to "info-whelm" us into a state of perpetual distraction. If an awareness of the Great Acceleration is (to put it mildly) unevenly distributed, the experience of accelerated connectivity (and the paradoxical disconnects that can accompany it) is increasingly widespread.

In an age of degraded attention spans it becomes doubly difficult yet increasingly urgent that we focus on the toll exacted, over time, by the slow violence of ecological degradation. We live, writes Cory Doctorow, in an era when the electronic screen has become an "ecosystem of interruption technologies."<sup>29</sup> Or as former Microsoft executive Linda Stone puts it, we now live in an age of "continuous partial attention."<sup>30</sup> Fast is faster than it used to be, and story units have become concomitantly shorter. In this cultural milieu of digitally speeded up time, and foreshortened narrative, the intergenerational aftermath becomes a harder sell. So to render slow violence visible entails, among other things, redefining speed: we see such efforts in talk of accelerated species loss, rapid climate change, and in attempts to recast "glacial"—once a dead metaphor for "slow"—as a rousing, iconic image of unacceptably fast loss.

Efforts to make forms of slow violence more urgently visible suffered a setback in the United States in the aftermath of 9/11, which reinforced a spectacular, immediately sensational, and instantly hyper-visible image of what constitutes a violent threat. The fiery spectacle of the collapsing towers was burned into the national psyche as *the* definitive image of violence, setting back by years attempts to rally public sentiment against climate change, a threat that is incremental, exponential, and far less sensorially visible. Condoleezza Rice's strategic fantasy of a mushroom cloud looming over America if the United States failed to invade Iraq gave further visual definition to cataclysmic violence as something explosive and instantaneous, a recognizably cinematic, immediately sensational, pyrotechnic event.

The representational bias against slow violence has, furthermore, a critically dangerous impact on what counts as a casualty in the first place. Casualties of slow violence—human and environmental—are the casualties most likely not to be seen, not to be counted. Casualties of slow violence become light-weight, disposable casualties, with dire consequences for the ways wars are remembered, which in turn has dire consequences for the projected casualties from future wars. We can observe this bias at work in the way wars, whose lethal repercussions spread across space and time, are tidily bookended in the historical record. Thus, for instance, a 2003 *New York Times* editorial on Vietnam declared that "during our dozen years there, the U.S. killed and helped kill at least 1.5 million people."<sup>31</sup> But that simple phrase "during our dozen years there" shrinks the toll, foreshortening the ongoing



slow-motion slaughter: hundreds of thousands survived the official war years, only to slowly lose their lives later to Agent Orange. In a 2002 study, the environmental scientist Arnold Schechter recorded dioxin levels in the bloodstreams of Bien Hoa residents at 135 times the levels of Hanoi's inhabitants, who lived far north of the spraying.<sup>32</sup> The afflicted include thousands of children born decades after the war's end. More than thirty years after the last spray run, Agent Orange continues to wreak havoc as, through biomagnification, dioxins build up in the fatty tissues of pivotal foods such as duck and fish and pass from the natural world into the cooking pot and from there to ensuing human generations. An Institute of Medicine committee has by now linked seventeen medical conditions to Agent Orange; indeed, as recently as 2009 it uncovered fresh evidence that exposure to the chemical increases the likelihood of developing Parkinson's disease and ischemic heart disease.<sup>33</sup> Under such circumstances, wherein long-term risks continue to emerge, to bookend a war's casualties with the phrase "during our dozen years there" is misleading: that small, seemingly innocent phrase is a powerful reminder of how our rhetorical conventions for bracketing violence routinely ignore ongoing, belated casualties.

#### Slow Violence and Strategies of Representation: Writer-Activism

How do we bring home—and bring emotionally to life—threats that take time to wreak their havoc, threats that never materialize in one spectacular, explosive, cinematic scene? *Apprehension* is a critical word here, a crossover term that draws together the domains of perception, emotion, and action. To engage slow violence is to confront layered predicaments of apprehension: to apprehend—to arrest, or at least mitigate—often imperceptible threats requires rendering them apprehensible to the senses through the work of scientific and imaginative testimony. An influential lineage of environmental thought gives primacy to immediate sensory apprehension, to sight above all, as foundational for any environmental ethics of place. George Perkins Marsh, the mid-nineteenth-century environmental pioneer, argued in *Man and Nature* that "the power most important to cultivate, and, at the same time, hardest to acquire, is that of seeing what is before him."<sup>34</sup> Aldo Leopold similarly insisted that "we can be ethical only toward what we can see."<sup>35</sup> But

what happens when we are unsighted, when what extends before us—in the space and time that we most deeply inhabit—remains invisible? How, indeed, are we to act ethically toward human and biotic communities that lie beyond our sensory ken? What then, in the fullest sense of the phrase, is the place of seeing in the world that we now inhabit? What, moreover, is the place of the other senses? How do we both make slow violence visible yet also challenge the privileging of the visible?

Such questions have profound consequences for the apprehension of slow violence, whether on a cellular or a transnational scale. Planetary consciousness (a notion that has undergone a host of theoretical formulations) becomes pertinent here, perhaps most usefully in the sense in which Mary Louise Pratt elaborates it, linking questions of power and perspective, keeping front and center the often latent, often invisible violence in the view. Who gets to see, and from where? When and how does such empowered seeing become normative? And what perspectives—not least those of the poor or women or the colonized—do hegemonic sight conventions of visibility obscure? Pratt's formulation of planetary consciousness remains invaluable because it allows us to connect forms of apprehension to forms of imperial violence.<sup>36</sup>

Against this backdrop, I want to introduce the third central concern of this book. Alongside slow violence and the environmentalism of the poor, the chapters that follow are critically concerned with the political, imaginative, and strategic role of environmental writer-activists. Writer-activists can help us apprehend threats imaginatively that remain imperceptible to the senses, either because they are geographically remote, too vast or too minute in scale, or are played out across a time span that exceeds the instance of observation or even the physiological life of the human observer. In a world permeated by insidious, yet unseen or imperceptible violence, imaginative writing can help make the unapparent appear, making it accessible and tangible by humanizing drawn-out threats inaccessible to the immediate senses. Writing can challenge perceptual habits that downplay the damage slow violence inflicts and bring into imaginative focus apprehensions that elude sensory corroboration. The narrative imaginings of writer-activists may thus offer us a different kind of witnessing: of sights unseen.

To allay states of apprehension—trepidations, forebodings, shadows cast by the invisible—entails facing the challenge, at once imaginative and

scientific, of giving the unapparent a materiality upon which we can act. Yet poor communities, often disproportionately exposed to the force fields of slow violence—be they military residues or imported e-waste or the rising tides of climate change—are the communities least likely to attract sustained scientific inquiry into causes, effects, and potential redress. Such poor communities are abandoned to sporadic science at best and usually no science at all; they are also disproportionately subjected to involuntary pharmaceutical experiments. Indeed, when such communities raise concerns, they often become targets of well-funded antiscience by forces that have a legal or commercial interest in manufacturing and disseminating doubt.<sup>37</sup> Such embattled communities, beset by officially unacknowledged hazards, must find ways to broadcast their inhabited fears, their lived sense of a corroded environment, within the broader global struggles over apprehension. It is here that writers, filmmakers, and digital activists may play a mediating role in helping counter the layered invisibility that results from insidious threats, from temporal protractedness, and from the fact that the afflicted are people whose quality of life—and often whose very existence—is of indifferent interest to the corporate media.

To address violence discounted by dominant structures of apprehension is necessarily to engage the culturally variable issue of *who counts as a witness*. Contests over what counts as violence are intimately entangled with conflicts over who bears the social authority of witness, which entails much more than simply seeing or not seeing. The entangled politics of spectacle and witnessing have implications that stretch well beyond environmental slow violence. In domestic abuse, for instance, violence may be life threatening but slow, bloodless, and brutal in ways that are not always immediately fatal: a broken nose constitutes a different order of evidence from food or access to medical treatment or human company withheld over an extended period. A locked door can be a weapon. Doors for women are often long-term, nonlethal weapons that leave no telltale bloody trail; doors don't bear witness to a single, decisive blow. In many cultures, moreover, rape isn't defined as rape if it is inflicted by a husband. And in some societies, a rape isn't rape unless three adult men are present to witness it. As the journalistic chestnut has it, "if it bleeds, it leads." And as a corollary, if it's bloodless, slow-motion violence, the story is more likely to be buried, particularly if it's relayed by people whose witnessing authority is culturally discounted.

## The Environmentalism of the Poor and Displacement in Place

In the global resource wars, the environmentalism of the poor is frequently triggered when an official landscape is forcibly imposed on a vernacular one.<sup>38</sup> A vernacular landscape is shaped by the affective, historically textured maps that communities have devised over generations, maps replete with names and routes, maps alive to significant ecological and surface geological features. A vernacular landscape, although neither monolithic nor undisputed, is integral to the socioenvironmental dynamics of community rather than being wholly externalized—treated as out there, as a separate nonrenewable resource. By contrast, an official landscape—whether governmental, NGO, corporate, or some combination of those—is typically oblivious to such earlier maps; instead, it writes the land in a bureaucratic, externalizing, and extraction-driven manner that is often pitilessly instrumental. Lawrence Summers' scheme to export rich-nation garbage and toxicity to Africa, for example, stands as a grandiose (though hardly exceptional) instance of a highly rationalized official landscape that, whether in terms of elite capture of resources or toxic disposal, has often been projected onto ecosystems inhabited by those whom Annu Jalais, in an Indian context, calls "dispensable citizens."<sup>39</sup>

I would argue, then, that the exponential upsurge in indigenous resource rebellions across the globe during the high age of neoliberalism has resulted largely from a clash of temporal perspectives between the short-termers who arrive (with their official landscape maps) to extract, despoil, and depart and the long-termers who must live inside the ecological aftermath and must therefore weigh wealth differently in time's scales. In the pages that follow, I will highlight and explore resource rebellions against developer-dispossessors who descend from other time zones to impose on habitable environments unsustainable calculations about what constitutes the duration of human gain. Change is a cultural constant but the pace of change is not. Hence the temporal contests over how to sustain, regenerate, exhaust, or obliterate the landscape as resource become critical. More than material wealth is here at stake: imposed official landscapes typically discount spiritualized vernacular landscapes, severing webs of accumulated cultural meaning and treating the landscape as if it were uninhabited by the living, the unborn, and the animate deceased.

The ensuing losses are consistent with John Berger's lament over capitalism's disdain for interdependencies by foreshortening our sense of time, thereby rendering the deceased immaterial:

The living reduce the dead to those who have lived; yet the dead already include the living in their own great collective. . . . Until the dehumanization of society by capitalism, all the living awaited the experience of the dead. It was their ultimate future. By themselves the living were incomplete. Thus living and dead were interdependent. Always. Only a uniquely modern form of egoism has broken this interdependence. With disastrous results for the living, who now think of the dead as the *eliminated*.<sup>46</sup>

Hence, one should add, our perspective on environmental asset stripping should include among assets stripped the mingled presence in the landscape of multiple generations, with all the hindsight and foresight that entails.

Against this backdrop, I consider in this book what can be called the temporalities of place. Place is a temporal attainment that must be constantly renegotiated in the face of changes that arrive from without and within, some benign, others potentially ruinous. To engage the temporal displacements involved in slow violence against the poor thus requires that we rethink questions of physical displacement as well. In the chapters that follow, I track the socioenvironmental fallout from developmental agendas whose primary beneficiaries live elsewhere; as when, for example, oasis dwellers in the Persian Gulf get trucked off to unknown destinations so that American petroleum engineers and their sheik collaborators can develop their "finds." Or when a megadam arises and (whether erected in the name of some dictatorial edict, the free market, structural adjustment, national development, or far-off urban or industrial need) displaces and disperses those who had developed through their vernacular landscapes their own adaptable, if always imperfect and vulnerable, relation to riverine possibility.

Paradoxically, those forcibly removed by development include conservation refugees. Too often in the global South, conservation, driven by powerful transnational nature NGOs, combines an antidevelopmental rhetoric with the development of finite resources for the touristic few, thereby depleting vital resources for long-term residents. (I explore this paradox

more fully in Chapter 6: Stranger in the Eco-village: Race, Tourism, and Environmental Time.)

In much of what follows, I address the resistance mounted by impoverished communities who have been involuntarily moved out of their knowledge; I address as well the powers—transnational, national, and local—behind such forced removals. My angle of vision is largely through writers who have affiliated themselves with social movements that seek to stave off one of two ruinous prospects: either the threatened community capitulates and is scattered (across refugee camps, placeless "relocation" sites, desperate favelas, and unwelcoming foreign lands), or the community refuses to move but, as its world is undermined, effectively becomes a community of refugees in place. What I wish to stress here, then, are not just those communities that are involuntarily (and often militarily) relocated to less hospitable environs, but also those affected by what I call displacement without moving. In other words, I want to propose a more radical notion of displacement, one that, instead of referring solely to the movement of people from their places of belonging, refers rather to the loss of the land and resources beneath them, a loss that leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable.

For if environmental protest has frequently been incited by the threat of forced removal, it has also been incited by the threat of displacement without moving. Such a threat entails being simultaneously immobilized and moved out of one's living knowledge as one's place loses its life-sustaining features. What does it mean for people declared disposable by some "new" economy to find themselves existing out of place in place as, against the odds, they seek to slow the ecological assaults on inhabitable possibility? What does it mean for subsistence communities to discover they are goners with nowhere to go, that their once-sustaining landscapes have been gutted of their capacity to sustain by an externalizing, instrumental logic? The desperate entrapments, the claustal options that result have galvanized environmental justice insurrections, in the global South and beyond.

I would like to ground this point in Stephanie Black's superb documentary *Life and Debt*. The film can be interpreted as dramatizing the way neoliberal policies impose displacement without moving (or stationary displacement) on Jamaican communities, a process intimately connected to the long-term socioenvironmental damage inflicted on the island by slow violence. *Life and*

*Debt* adapts to a Jamaican context Kincaid's Antiguan polemic against tourism and against the neocolonial politics of unequal freedom of movement. This is a film about arrivals, departures, and those unable either to arrive or depart. Yet the most consequential arrival is the hardest to depict: the advent of the "free market" in the form of IMF structural adjustment, rendered visible by planes disgorging federally subsidized American milk, onions, and potatoes at prices that destroy unsubsidized Jamaican farmers whose operations were small scale but intergenerational. To compensate for the resultant agricultural collapse and the rising debt that follows from importing more subsidized American food, Jamaica must increase its dependence on tourists who, disgorged from sleek jets, are then immured in dedicated pleasure zones. Black's film sets up an implicit link between the visiting tourists' structured getaways and the structural adjustment visited upon the locals from which there is no getaway. We see guard dogs being trained to segregate mobile pleasure-seekers from trapped, angry locals forced to live their dislocated lives in place. Here, in capsule form, we witness one industry that has thrived under neoliberalism: the security industry, which has flourished on the insecurities wrought by structural adjustment, by the "opening up" of markets, and by the erosion of long-term relations to the land through the annexation—and carting off—of the very conditions of life.

Security has become one of neoliberalism's signature growth industries, exemplified by the international boom in gated communities, as walls have spread like kudzu, and the marketplace in barriers has literally soared, from Los Angeles to Sao Paolo; from Johannesburg to Jakarta; from Lagos, Lima, and Mexico City to Karachi. Ironically, as neoliberal policy makers have pushed to bring down barriers to "free trade," those same policies have resulted in the erection of ever higher barriers segregating inordinate wealth from inordinate poverty. Neoliberalism's proliferating walls concretize a short-term psychology of denial: the delusion that we can survive long term in a world whose resources are increasingly unshared. The wall, read in terms of neoliberalism and environmental slow violence, materializes temporal as well as spatial denial through a literal concretizing of out of sight out of mind.

Neoliberal assaults on inhabited environments have of course met with variable success. Whether the target is an immobile resource such as forests, a mobile resource such as water, or a fugitive resource such as wildlife, the

environment itself is not a predictably quiescent victim.<sup>41</sup> Resistance may assume not just human forms but also arise from an unanticipated recalcitrance on the part of a targeted resource, which may prove harder to commodify and profitably remove or manage than corporate moguls foresaw. We have witnessed as much, for example, in the largely unsuccessful attempts to privatize water: if 20 percent of the world's largest cities now have privatized water systems, such efforts have sometimes experienced reversals—as in Bolivia, for instance—through a mixture of human resistance, topographical impediments, and obstacles to social engineering.

That said, we need to be cautious about romanticizing the noncompliance that may inhere in a targeted resource: relative to the accelerated plunder involved, say, in the "second scramble" for Africa—as American, Australian, Chinese, European, and South African corporations cash in on resource-rich, regulation-poor, war-fractured societies—the resistance posed by nature itself should not be overstated.<sup>42</sup> The recent turn within environmental studies toward celebrating the creative resilience of ecosystems can be readily hijacked by politicians, lobbyists, and corporations who oppose regulatory controls and strive to minimize pollution liability. Co-opting the "nature-and-time-will-heal" argument has become integral to attempts to privatize profits while externalizing risk and cleanup, both of which can be delegated to "nature's business."

This was dramatically illustrated by the Deepwater Horizon disaster—in the laxity that contributed to the blowout and in the aftermath. Big Oil and government agencies both invoked natural resilience as an advance strategy for minimizing oversight. Before the blowout, the Minerals Management Service of the U.S. Interior Department had concluded that "spills in deep water are not likely to affect listed birds. . . . Deepwater spills would either be transported away from coastal habitats or prevented, for the most part, from reaching coastal habitats by natural weathering processes."<sup>43</sup> Even after the disaster, this line of reasoning persisted. Oil industry apologist Rep. Don Young (R-AK), testifying at congressional hearings on the blowout, knew exactly how to mine this "natural agency" logic: the Deepwater Horizon spill was "not an environmental disaster," he declared. "I will say that again and again because it is a natural phenomenon. Oil has seeped into this ocean for centuries, will continue to do it. . . . We will lose some birds, we will lose some fixed sea-life, but overall it will recover."<sup>44</sup> BP

spokesman John Curry likewise explained how industrious microbes would cleanse the oil from the gulf: "Nature," he concluded sanguinely, "has a way of helping the situation."<sup>45</sup> BP representatives repeatedly invoked the capacity of marine life to metabolize hydrocarbons and the dispersing powers of microbial degradation. But in conscripting nature as a volunteer clean up crew, BP and its Washington allies downplayed the way ravenous microbes, in consuming oxygen, thereby starved other organisms and exacerbated expanding oceanic dead zones.<sup>46</sup> What will be the long-term cascade effect of the slow violence, the mass die-offs, of phytoplankton at the food chain base? It is far too early to tell.

In short, the very environment that high-risk, deep-water drilling endangered was conscripted by industry through a kind of natural outsourcing. And so Big Oil's invocation of nature's healing powers needs to be recognized as part of a broader strategy of image management and liability limitation by greenwashing. Natural agency can indeed take unexpected, sometimes heartening forms, but we should be alert to the ways corporate colossi and governments can hijack that logic to grant themselves advance or retrospective absolution. Crucially, for my arguments about slow violence, the time frames of damage assessment and potential recovery are wildly out of sync. The deep-time thinking that celebrates natural healing is strategically disastrous if it provides political cover for reckless corporate short-termism.<sup>47</sup>

#### Writer-Activists and Representational Power

The environmentalism of the poor is frequently catalyzed by resource imperialism inflicted on the global South to maintain the unsustainable consumer appetites of rich-country citizens and, increasingly, of the urban middle classes in the global South itself. The outsourcing of environmental crisis, whether through rapid or slow violence, has a particularly profound impact on the world's ecosystem people—those hundreds of millions who depend for their livelihood on modest resource catchment areas at the opposite extreme from the planetary resource catchment areas plundered by the wealthy—the wealthy whom Gadgil and Guha have dubbed "resource omnivores."<sup>48</sup> The writer-activists I engage in this book share a desire to give human definition to such outsourced suffering, a desire to lay bare the

dissociational dynamics whereby, for example, a rich-country conservation ethic is uncoupled from environmental devastation, externalized abroad, in which it is implicated. Correspondingly, we witness in these writers a desire to give life and dimension to the strategies—oppositional, affirmative, and yes, often desperate and fractured—that emerge from those who bear the brunt of the planet's ecological crises.

The writer-activists I discuss in these pages who engage the environmentalism of the poor are a heterogeneous cast. Some, like Wangari Maathai and Ken Saro-Wiwa, helped launch environmental movements and assumed within them the role of *porte-parole*. They also became iconic figureheads and ultimately (in a phrase that expresses a contradictory tension) autobiographers of collective movements. Others, like Arundhati Roy and Indra Sinha, affiliated themselves with well-established struggles, helping amplify causes marginalized by the corporate media. Roy also served as a transnational go-between, connecting a specific struggle against the Sardar Sarovar Dam with international campaigns against megadams and, beyond that, with the antiglobalization movement itself. For Roy, Sinha, Maathai, and Saro-Wiwa, the extra visibility they afforded the environmentalism of the poor entailed, crucially, the development of rhetorical alliances that opened up connective avenues between environmental justice and other rights discourses: women's rights, minority rights, tribal rights, property rights, the right to freedom of speech and assembly, and the right to enhanced economic self-sufficiency.

Sometimes a writer-activist's authority becomes, in their home country, a lightning rod for controversy in ways quite different from the controversies their writings stir abroad. Roy's polemical essays in support of the movement opposing the Sardar Sarovar Dam on India's Narmada River are a case in point: her testimony reached a vast international audience and enhanced the visibility of marginalized rural communities who mobilized against megadams, expressly in the Narmada Valley but more broadly across the global South. On the one hand, the *New York Times* refused to publish Roy (and other dissident public intellectuals, such as Edward Said and Noam Chomsky) presumably because her antiglobalization essays were ideologically unsettling. On the other hand, Indian opinion about her interventions split between those who lauded her for putting her celebrity in the service of the poor and those who lambasted her for behaving in a self-serving

manner. An Anglophone Indian writer like Roy, whose national and international audiences are both substantial, faces particular challenges in trying to reconcile disjunctive audiences: rhetorical strategies, tonal inflections, and informational background that engage an international audience risk estranging a national one and vice versa. How different the situation is for a socioenvironmental writer like Derek Walcott from a small society that comprises an infinitesimal fraction of his audience; even after he was awarded the Nobel Prize, Walcott's books were nowhere to be found on sale in his natal St. Lucia.

But what of writer-activists operating in circumstances where no viable movement existed to challenge the imperially buttressed forces of crony capitalism, where campaigns for environmental justice took shape before the term itself existed and where such campaigns assumed the forms of at best spasmodic protest? One such activist was Abdelrahman Munif who, by shuttling across a broad spread of fictional and nonfictional forms, gave imaginative definition to the long view of the resource wars that have afflicted the Persian Gulf. His writings speak in defense of socioenvironmental memory itself—above all, the suppressed memory of the uprisings (which peaked in the 1940s and 1950s) against American petro-imperialism in partnership with an emergent petro-despotism. By the mid-1980s, when Munif's *Cities of Salt* appeared, that dissident lineage protesting the petro-state's union-busting, racist labor practices had been brutally quashed. Yet Munif was able to give imaginative and political definition to the memory of social protest while foreshadowing, with uncanny prescience, how the crushed campaigns for dignity and rights would become dangerously diverted into an anti-imperial religious fundamentalism.

In turning to the Caribbean and South Africa, I revisit the question of the writer-activist's role in fortifying embattled socioenvironmental memory. Jamaica Kincaid, June Jordan, Njabulo Ndebele, and Nadine Gordimer found themselves writing into the headwinds of an international nature industry propelled by a romanticized colonial history and by neocolonial fantasy. All four writers draw to the surface inconvenient questions about long-term ecologies of social injustice that cannot be colorfully blended into touristic boilerplate. In writing against a violent and violating invisibility they engage the contradictions that permeate the marketplace in idealized natural retreats—a marketplace premised on a retreat from

socioenvironmental memory itself. At stake is the way suppressed histories of land theft, forced removal, slavery, and coercive labor achieve their most concentrated form in the figure of the spectral servant, whose obligatory self-effacement smoothes the tourist's path toward immersion in an unsullied nature rich in pure moment, in serendipitous immediacy.

The anticolonial energies that inform the essays I discuss by Kincaid, Ndebele, and Jordan are complicated by painfully riven reflections on representational authority. When you have ascended economically as a black woman or man into the middle classes, where do you stand in relation to those whose plight you depict and whose service, as a tourist, you depend on? Where do you belong in the historically sanitized, colonially hued international marketplace in environmental relaxation? In writing about tourism, poverty, and clashing cultures of nature, Kincaid, Ndebele, and Jordan all attempt to negotiate, through memoir and polemic, the minefields of race, class, and gender that confront them on entering a realm of nature industry tourism clearly not designed for them yet to which they can afford class access.

Many of the writers I consider in this book, as well as the three figures whom I acknowledge in my preface—Edward Said, Rachel Carson, and Ramachandra Guha—exemplify in their work the versatile possibilities of politically engaged nonfiction. For one of the enduring passions that informs this book is the special allure that nonfiction possesses for me as a writer, scholar, reader, and teacher. I am drawn to nonfiction's robust adaptability, imaginative and political, as well as to its information-carrying capacity and its aura of the real.<sup>49</sup> Yet a tenacious tendency remains to marginalize nonfiction, to treat it as at best supplementary to "real literature" like the novel or poetry rather than taking seriously its adaptive rhetorical capacities, the chameleon powers that make it such an indispensable resource for creative activism. Indeed, a particular joy of teaching transnational environmental literatures is the vigorous, varied writing on offer from within nonfiction's broad domain—memoirs, essays, public science writing, polemics, travel literature, graphic memoirs, manifestos, and investigative journalism. Some of the writers I consider in the chapters that follow work principally in nonfiction forms, others in fiction, while most of them shuttle strategically and instinctively between the two. At a time when the memoir, in particular, has come under fire for self-absorption,

we would do well to remember that the “if-it’s-me-it-must-be-interesting” memoir is not the only type. The most effective memoirists, not least environmental ones, find ways to draw on the form’s intimate energies while also offering the reader a social depth of field.

Much has been written about the literary right to represent, some of it significant work, some overly elaborate. Clearly power, including representational power, often works at an exaggerated remove. The writers I engage have ascended not just into the literate but into the publishing classes, thereby creating some inevitable distance from the bulk of the impoverished people about whom they write. Yet in the scheme of things, this hardly seems to me the most suspect kind of distance. Relative to the invisibility that threatens the marginalized poor and the environments they depend on, the bridge-work such writer-activists undertake offers a mostly honorable counter to the distancing rhetoric of neoliberal “free market” resource development, a rhetoric that displaces onto future generations—above all through slow violence—the human and ecological costs of such “development.”

The interplay between representational authority and displacement matters at a biographical level as well.<sup>50</sup> Most of the writers I discuss—Maathai, Saro-Wiwa, Munif, Kincaid, Jordan, Ndebele, Naipaul, Carson, Richard Rodriguez, Nadine Gordimer, and James Baldwin—were the first in their families to attend college.<sup>51</sup> From the contradictions of sudden class displacement—often compounded by transgressed expectations that attend gender, race, sexuality, or immigrant status—a certain type of public intellectual may arise, someone who has to negotiate the vexing terrain of unfamiliar—and unfamiliar—privilege fraught with an anxious sense of collective responsibility. The public role such figures assume is often animated both by an expressive anger and by the fear that their novel, precarious privilege is temporary or illusory—that one misstep may plunge them back into a viscerally remembered familial indigence. What frequently appears, then, is a quest to improvise community, both literal and imaginative, to help counter the isolation that comes from feeling economically, professionally, and psychologically unsheltered by precedent. These tendencies infect the socioenvironmental and creative sensibilities that distinguish many of the writers in this book. Having extricated themselves improbably from impoverished circumstances—and then seeing their work published in the *New Yorker*, or on being awarded a Ph.D. or even the

Nobel Prize—they stand above the immediate environmental struggles of the poor yet remain bonded through memory (and through their own vertiginous anxieties) to the straitened circumstances from which they or their families recently emerged. Hence, as go-betweens, such writers are at the very least intimate, highly motivated translators.

The challenges of translating across chasms of class, race, gender, and nation is thus viscerally connected to memories of self-translation across dauntingly wide divides, as Tsitsi Dangarembga’s bildungsroman set in colonial Rhodesia, *Nervous Conditions*, illustrates so well. The thirteen-year-old rural heroine, Tambu, is granted the unexpected chance to acquire an education when her brother dies and a beneficent uncle decides to divert the money he had committed to his nephew’s schooling to his niece instead.<sup>52</sup> In approaching the mission school where she hopes to reinvent herself, the first signal to Tambu of the distance she must travel finds expression through divergent cultures of nature:

The smooth, stoneless drive ran between squat, robust conifers on one side and a blaze of canna lilies burning scarlet and amber on the other. Plants like that belonged to the cities. They had belonged to the pages of my language reader, to the yards of Ben and Betty’s uncle in town. Now, having seen it for myself because of my Babamukur’s kindness, I too could think of planting things for merrier reasons than the chore of keeping breath in the body. I wrote it down in my head: I would ask Maiguru for some bulbs and plant a bed of those gay lilies on the homestead in front of the house. Our home would answer well to being cheered up by such lovely flowers. Bright and cheery, they had been planted for joy. What a strange idea that was. It was a liberation, the first of many that followed from my transition to the mission.<sup>53</sup>

Tambu, on the brink of being educated toward middle-class possibility, experiences the garden as a portal into her imminent self-translation, as an ornate reminder of the gap she must leap. Emerging from her uncle’s car as (to use her word) a “peasant,” she cannot yet see this garden, exotically exempt from human need, as ordinary: it belongs to books, to the wealthy,

to those at liberty to treat the earth as an aesthetic canvas.<sup>54</sup> This indigent rural girl thus stands on the threshold of a divided self: she will be admitted to this garden aesthetic and learn to love it, but always with a double vision. She will belong forever to two earths: this second soil of luxurious self-expression but always just beneath it her childhood soil, fraught with survival's urgent chores.

A contortionist concern with representational authority can distract us from the fortitude required by those rare writers who, having escaped familial poverty, can convey an experientially rooted environmentalism that straddles immense divides. It is no coincidence that Jamaica Kincaid alights on Dangarembga's garden descriptions to contrast them with those gardens, lush with assumed access, that she encounters in Henry James.<sup>55</sup> One senses Kincaid looking on as an outsider at James's easy familiarity with dominant upper-class European conventions of horticultural depiction. By creating an alliance with Dangarembga's character, by choosing her as an imaginative conspirator, Kincaid, the naturalized Caribbean American, denatures James's gardens which, for all their literary floral familiarity, are just that: the kinds of gardens that prevail in a literature written predominantly by those remote from the soil perspectives of the laboring poor.

This recognition scene between an Antiguan-American essayist and a fictional Zimbabwean character speaks to the politics of the unforeseeable imaginative connection, to the far-off, serendipitous chance find that becomes an exhortation.<sup>56</sup> The scene speaks, more broadly, to the unpredictable dynamics of cross-cultural translation that attend the creative circuits of globalization from below, in literature and other cultural forms. We see this process at work in the way activists like Saro-Wiwa, Maathai, Chico Mendes, and Mahatma Gandhi have assumed an allegorical potency for geographically distant struggles. For example, on the tenth anniversary of Saro-Wiwa's execution, anti-Shell activists in County Mayo, a region of Ireland's historically impoverished west, unveiled a vast mural of Saro-Wiwa whom they had adopted posthumously as the iconic transnational figurehead of their local struggle against Shell. The mural displayed a Saro-Wiwa poem translated into Gaelic and the names of the Ogoni Eight executed alongside Saro-Wiwa—that in an Irish community enraged by the imprisonment of the so-called Rossport Five, activists who had nonviolently protested Shell's plans to build a refinery close to their homes. Spill-prone pipelines were to

link the inland refinery to offshore drilling sites, thereby jeopardizing the health and livelihood of a fishing and farming community dependent, as in the Niger Delta, on fragile intertidal ecosystems.<sup>57</sup>

Anna Tsing observes similarly how in post-Suharto Indonesia, the Chico Mendes story became for grassroots activists a malleable, inspirational precedent reformulated for local need. So too the largely female tree-huggers who had energized India's Chipko movement entered into Indonesian environmental parlance as a story of gendered resistance to forest stripping by globalizing corporate forces.<sup>58</sup> Even before the Internet and cell phones became widespread, such circulating allegories were aided by traveling environmentalists and by writer-activists—like Vandana Shiva, whose eco-feminist reading of the Chipko movement inflected its

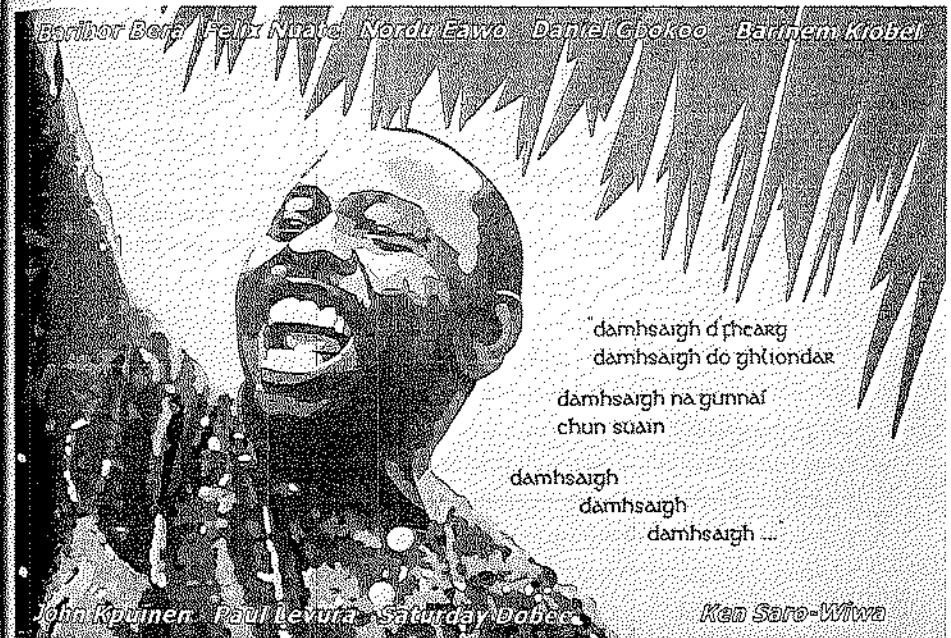


Figure 1 Mural of Ken Saro-Wiwa in County Mayo, Ireland, for a campaign by Irish activists against Shell. Some of his poetry (translated into Gaelic) is displayed, as well as the names of the eight other Ogoni activists executed on November 10, 1995, by Nigerian military personnel. Reproduced by permission of Wikimedia Commons.



circulation among antiglobalization environmental movements, as well as among NGOs, thereby helping reshape the character of international funding and debate.

Such precedents—whether through iconic figureheads or entire social movements—offer resources of hope in the unequal battle to apprehend, to stave off, or at least retard the slow violence inflicted by globalizing forces. Such precedents help us engage, in all their complexity, the politics of the visible and the invisible, as environmental justice movements—and the writer-activists aligned with them—strategize to shift the balance of visibility both in the urgent present and over the long haul, pushing back against the forces of temporal inattention that compound injustices of class, gender, race, and region.

#### The Environmental Humanities and the Edge Effect

Field biologists have devised the term “ecotone” to characterize the border zones between adjacent communities of vegetation where (as between, say, grasslands and wetlands) life forms that ordinarily require discrete conditions meet and interact. Ecotones may thereby open up new configurations of possibility (and for some species, introduce new threats) as the transitional areas create so-called edge effects. In university life, we are witnessing an upsurge in these edge effects as interpenetrating fields proliferate at the borders between once separate disciplines, at times creating new dynamic combinations while also, depending on one’s perspective, inflicting casualties through habitat fragmentation. In the scholarly ecotone, as in the biological, one may detect an elevated concentration in the sheer variety of life-forms, but at the expense of less-adaptable, specialist species.

How adaptable will the humanities prove in a less specialist environment? In particular, what kinds of connective corridors toward other disciplines can scholars creatively navigate in an intellectual milieu where habitat fracture is becoming increasingly pervasive? Certainly, the environmental humanities are entering a dynamic phase, as the long-established field of environmental history has in recent years encountered the ecocritical terrain of literary studies. We seem to be at a crucial turning point in the contribution literary scholars can make to the ecological humanities and, beyond that, to environmental studies at large.

Critical choices now confront us as scholars and writers reaching out to other fields as we try to consolidate transformative possibilities emerging at the edges of the humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences. Influential environmental literary critics, like Lawrence Buell, Wai Chee Dimock, and Ursula Heise have begun to forge innovative connections between literary environmentalism and the sciences around, for example, chaos theory and the premises underlying restoration ecology.<sup>59</sup> What remains less developed, however, are the energizing interdisciplinary possibilities, the unrealized creative bridgework, between environmental literary studies and the social sciences.<sup>60</sup> Such possibilities are overdue for recognition and, to that end, in the chapters that follow I have attempted to strengthen such links.

In so doing, I have drawn on environmental scholarship by anthropologists, geographers, political scientists, and sociologists like Fernando Coronil, Al Gedicks, Ramachandra Guha, Adriana Petryna, Anna Tsing, and Michael Watts. I have drawn inspiration, too, from the writings of leading progressive public intellectuals of our age: John Berger, Mike Davis, Eduardo Galeano, Naomi Klein, George Monbiot, and Rebecca Solnit among them, all of whom have engaged, with ambitious communicative intent, transnational questions arising from the borderlands between empire, neoliberalism, environmentalism, and social justice. I have thereby sought, first, to widen the interdisciplinary avenues available to us and, second, to keep alive a sense of the hugely varied public registers that writers can marshal to testify on issues of world urgency.

When literary studies becomes uncoupled from worldly concerns, we frequently witness, alongside an excessive regard for ahistoric philosophy, an accompanying historically indifferent formalism that treats the study of aesthetics as the literary scholar’s definitive calling. Questions of social change and power become projected onto questions of form so that formal categories such as rupture, irony, and bricolage assume an inflated agency through what Anne McClintock has called “a fetishism of form.”

The question is whether it is sufficient to locate agency in the internal fissures of discourse. [This] runs the risk of what can be called a fetishism of form: the projection of historical agency onto formal abstractions that are anthropomorphized and given a life of their own. Here abstractions become historical actors;

discourse desires, dreams and does the work of colonialism while also ensuring its demise. In the process, social relations between humans appear to metamorphize into structural relations between forms—through a formalist fetishism that effectively elides the messier questions of historical change and social activism.<sup>61</sup>

These concerns have a direct bearing on the relationship between literary forms, forms of socioenvironmental change, and environmental activism. Crucially, how do we as environmental scholars keep questions of political agency and historical change central in order to connect specialist knowledge to broader public worlds in which environmental policy takes shape and within which resistance movements arise? In this book, I have underscored those places where writers, by drawing on literature's testimonial and imaginative capacities, have engaged nonliterary forces for social change. Rather than displacing social agency onto anthropomorphized, idealized forms, I argue that any interest in form must be bound to questions of affiliation, including affiliation between writers and movements for environmental justice.

In addressing slow violence, the environmentalism of the poor, and the role of writer-activists, I have thus sought to integrate reflections on empire, foreign policy, and resistance with questions about aesthetic strategy. It is sometimes argued that ecocriticism's singular contribution to environmental studies ought to be centered on the aesthetic—that an attentiveness to form is the environmental literary scholar's proper bailiwick.<sup>62</sup> But there is a risk in this if the aesthetic gets walled off as a specialist domain, severed from the broader sociopolitical environmental contexts that animate the forms in question. The more exacting challenge, it seems to me, is how to articulate these vital aesthetic concerns to socioenvironmental transformation. Clearly, genre study remains a pertinent component of our inquiries into the complex interface between aesthetic forms and forms of socioenvironmental change. As Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell have argued succinctly: "the importance of affect in environmental writing highlights the function of genre as a point of transit—a kind of switch mechanism—in the reversible hierarchy between the local and the global."<sup>63</sup> Indeed, some of the most powerful transnational environmental writing, from Sinha and Roy to Munif and Saro-Wiwa, has arisen at those transit points where genre inventively mediates foreign policy, nation-state violence, and local resource rebellions.

### Postcolonialism and Superpower Parochialism

The most conceptually ambitious and influential figures within the ecocritical turn have been Buell and Heise, who deserve special credit for the reach and rigor of their innovative work, which has powerfully reshaped the priorities of literary studies and the environmental humanities more broadly. Buell and Heise are both Americanists by expertise and inclination. My background, and hence my approach, is somewhat different; my training is in postcolonial studies and, as such, the 'elsewheres' that fringe their work constitute my intellectual foreground.<sup>64</sup>

From a postcolonial perspective, the most startling feature of environmental literary studies has been its reluctance to engage the environmental repercussions of American foreign policy, particularly in relation to contemporary imperial practices. To be sure, this failing is not restricted to literary studies but has dogged the environmental humanities more broadly. Ramachandra Guha, while applauding the groundbreaking work by American environmental historians, has lamented their tardiness in exploring the transnational fallout of American environmental practices. Similarly, Robert Vitalis, the preeminent historian of U.S.-Saudi petro-politics, has expressed regret that "the U.S. historical profession has not as yet produced any significant tradition of scholarship in American interventionism that is comparable to the 'new social histories' of European imperialism."<sup>65</sup> Indeed, if as Greg Garrard noted in 2004, "the relationship between globalisation and ecocriticism has barely been broached," one should stress that the ecocritical silence around U.S. foreign policy has been especially resounding.<sup>66</sup> Why is it—as I explore in my final chapter—that in American environmental literary studies, transcendental approaches have typically trumped transnational ones?

There are signs that the environmental humanities are beginning to make some tentative headway toward incorporating the impact of U.S. imperialism on the poor in the global South—Vitalis's book *America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (2008) is an outstanding instance, as are powerful recent essays by Elizabeth DeLoughrey on the literatures associated with American nuclear colonialism in the Pacific, Susie O'Brien on Native food security, colonialism, and environmental heritage along the U.S.-Mexican border, and Pablo Mukherjee's groundbreaking materialist

work on Indian environmental literatures.<sup>67</sup> Yet despite such vitally important initiatives, the environmental humanities in the United States remain skewed toward nation-bound scholarship that is at best tangentially international and, even then, seldom engages the environmental fallout of U.S. foreign policy head on. What's at stake is not just disciplinary parochialism but, more broadly, what one might call superpower parochialism, that is, a combination of American insularity and America's power as the preeminent empire of the neoliberal age to rupture the lives and ecosystems of non-Americans, especially the poor, who may live at a geographical remove but who remain intimately vulnerable to the force fields of U.S. foreign policy.

To be sure, the U.S. empire has historically been a variable force, one that is not monolithic but subject to ever-changing internal fracture. The U.S., moreover, has long been—and is increasingly—globalized itself with all the attendant insecurities and inequities that result. However, to argue that the United States is subject to globalization—through, for example, blowback from climate change—does not belie the disproportionate impact that U.S. global ambitions and policies have exerted over socioenvironmental landscapes internationally.

Ecocritics—and literary scholars more broadly—faced with the challenges of thinking through vast differences in spatial and temporal scale commonly frame their analyses in terms of interpenetrating global and local forces. In such analyses cosmopolitanism—as a mode of being linked to particular aesthetic strategies—does much of the bridgework between extremes of scale. What critics have subjected to far less scrutiny is the role of the national-imperial as a mediating force with vast repercussions, above all, for those billions whom Mike Davis calls “the global residuum.”<sup>68</sup> Davis's image is a suggestive one, summoning to mind the remaindered humans, the compacted leavings on whom neoliberalism's inequities bear down most heavily. Yet those leavings, despite their aggregated dehumanization in the corporate media, remain animate and often resistant in unexpected ways; indeed, it is from such leavings that grassroots antiglobalization and the environmentalism of the poor have drawn nourishment.<sup>69</sup>

As American writers, scholars, and environmentalists, how can we attend more imaginatively to the outsourced conflicts inflamed by our unsustainable consumerism, by our military adventurism and unsurpassed arms industry, and by the global environmental fallout over the past three

decades of American-led neoliberal economic policies? (The immense environmental toll of militarism is particularly burdensome: in 2009, U.S. military expenditure was 46.5 percent of the global total and exceeded by 10 percent the expenditure of the next fourteen highest-ranked countries combined.)<sup>70</sup> How, moreover, can we engage the impact of our outsized consumerism and militarism on the life prospects of people who are elsewhere not just geographically but elsewhere in time, as slow violence seeps long term into ecologies—rural and urban—on which the global poor must depend for generations to come? How, in other words, can we rethink the standard formulation of neoliberalism as internalizing profits and externalizing risks not just in spatial but in temporal terms as well, so that we recognize the full force with which the externalized risks are outsourced to the unborn?

It is a pervasive condition of empires that they affect great swathes of the planet without the empire's populace being aware of that impact—indeed, without being aware that many of the affected places even exist. How many Americans are aware of the continuing socioenvironmental fallout from U.S. militarism and foreign policy decisions made three or four decades ago in, say, Angola or Laos? How many could even place those nation-states on a map? The imperial gap between foreign policy power and on-the-street awareness calls to mind George Lamming's shock, on arriving in Britain in the early 1950s, that most Londoners he met had never heard of his native Barbados and lumped together all Caribbean immigrants as “Jamaicans.”<sup>71</sup>

What I call superpower parochialism has been shaped by the myth of American exceptionalism and by a long-standing indifference—in the U.S. educational system and national media—to the foreign, especially foreign history, even when it is deeply enmeshed with U.S. interests. Thus, when considering the representational challenges posed by transnational slow violence, we need to ask what role American indifference to foreign history has played in camouflaging lasting environmental damage inflicted elsewhere. If all empires create acute disparities between global power and global knowledge, how has America's perception of itself as a young, forward-thrusting nation that claims to flourish by looking ahead rather than behind exacerbated the difficulty of socioenvironmental answerability for ongoing slow violence?<sup>72</sup>

Profiting from the asymmetrical relations between a domestically regulated environment and unregulated environments abroad is of course not

unique to America. But since World War II, the United States has wielded an unequalled power to bend the global regulatory climate in its favor. As William Finnegan notes regarding the Washington Consensus, "while we make the world safe for multinational corporations, it is by no means clear that they intend to return the favor."<sup>73</sup> The unreturned favor weighs especially heavily on impoverished communities in the global South who must stake their claims to environmental justice in the face of the Bretton Woods institutions (the World Bank, the IMF), the World Trade Organization, and the G8 (now G20) over which the United States has exercised disproportionate influence. That influence has been exercised, as well, through muscular conservation NGOs (the Nature Conservancy, the World Wildlife Fund, and Conservation International prominent among them) that have a long history of disregarding local human relations to the environment in order to implement American- and European-style conservation agendas. Clearly, the beneficiaries of such power asymmetries are not just American but transnational corporations, NGOs, and governments from across the North's rich nations, often working hand-in-fist with authoritarian regimes.

Yet within these resource wars, image, idiom, and narrative are themselves powerful, if unpredictable, resources that regardless of origins can help advance the environmentalism of the poor. As I note in the chapters on Ken Saro-Wiwa and Wangari Maathai, the discourse of environmental justice, borrowed largely from the West (and often through personal exposure to America), is frequently blended with local discursive traditions and, in these melded forms, adaptively redeployed as a strategic resource. Such transnational meldings may prove unstable, but they have become significant forces in the unequal battles waged by the poor as they strive to be seen and heard on an international stage. These hybridized discourses can help afford socioenvironmental struggles an emblematic significance that strengthens their claim on rich-nation media that might otherwise dismiss them as obscurely local conflicts. International attention, in turn, can help afford such movements some protective visibility within their own nation-states (although a backlash of violence may also result). Among those whom Al Gedicks has dubbed global resource rebels, the hybridized, traveling discourse of environmental justice has proven critical in forging both South-South alliances and South-North alliances, not least among those who find

themselves pitted against analogous threats—be they giant hydroelectric dams, for example, or toxic tailings.<sup>74</sup>

Moreover, the development of strategic rhetorical common ground, however fragile, has proven critical in attempts to move beyond knee-jerk oppositions counterposing misanthropic rich eco-colonialists against third worlders assumed to be hostile to a narrowly defined environmentalism. By laying claim to the mobile rhetoric of environmental justice, the dispossessed may enhance their prospects of becoming visible, audible agents of globalization from below. It is in the quest for such transnational visibility and audibility that writer-activists may play a critically enabling role.

In cautioning against a narrowing of literary studies that pulls back from the wider world, we need to recognize the radical energies that traditions of postcolonial engagement at their best have encouraged. Debates over the merits and demerits of the term postcolonial are by now quite extended; no value is to be gained from rehearsing them.<sup>75</sup> That said, postcolonial studies at its most incisive remains, it seems to me, an invaluable critical presence in an era of resurgent imperialism, an era in which—sometimes through outright, unregulated plunder, sometimes under camouflage of developmental agendas—a neoliberal order has widened, with ruinous environmental repercussions, the gulf between the expanding classes of the super-rich and our planet's 3 billion ultrapoor. Indeed, the official and informal militarization of resource extraction as well as paramilitary conservation practices in the global South continue to spark or inflame broader conflicts. Such environmentally intensified conflicts become indissociable from the eroded prospects, under neoliberalism, of maintaining sustainable livelihoods, often under marginal conditions. Gargantuan transnational corporations like BP, ExxonMobil, Shell, Freeport McMoran, and Walmart have wised up to the kudos they can gain from greenwashing in the countries of the rich, through high-minded advertisement campaigns, through strategic donations to NGOs and universities, by buying out or intimidating scientists who might testify against the slow violence of their practices, and through rarified talk about being fine stewards of our delicate planet. Meanwhile, back on planet Earth, they persist with their profitable devastation of relatively impoverished, less regulated societies—societies that have little visibility and recognition value in the rich-country corporate media. Such assaults on the livelihoods of the poor are given extra muscle by industry lobbyists

who, while greenwashing with one hand, campaign with the other hand to further skew the terms of trade, weakening whatever frail environmental, labor, and human rights, and economic regulations stand between them and a "freer" market. In short, the oil majors and allied transnational corporations are potent, active players in manufacturing the icons and stories that shape popular perception of environmental science and policy.

Against this backdrop, I am leery of the widespread assumption that everything postcolonial studies has enabled can always be assimilated, without loss, to the more ambitious, more contemporary-sounding global studies. The notion of the straight swap—midsized postcolonial for supersized global—is too often accompanied by a blunting of the adversarial edge, the oppositional incisiveness, that has distinguished postcolonial work at its most forceful. World literature studies has become a rich, dynamic field too diverse to characterize simply, but I do feel some concern about how the categorical turn, in literary studies, to world literature often ends up deflecting attention away from the anti-imperial concerns that a materialist postcolonial studies foregrounded. To be sure, we need scholarship and teaching that can address, in transnational terms, territories beyond postcolonialism's conventional reach. But in so doing we should be watchful that surface geographical gains are not marred by political retreat, that neoliberal acts of violence, for example—especially slow violence—are not hastily euphemized as "global flows." In the classroom and beyond, we need to challenge globalization's gung ho cheerleaders. Indeed, the most scintillating work by antiglobalization public intellectuals—Mike Davis, Naomi Klein, Amitava Kumar, Andrew Ross, and Arundhati Roy among them—carries forward postcolonialism's critical energies while moving beyond the field's geographical and analytical limitations.

Among the decisive challenges such critical initiatives face is that of scale: how can we imaginatively and strategically render visible vast force fields of interconnectedness against the attenuating effects of temporal and geographical distance? This is a crucial challenge if we are to generate any sustained understanding of the transnational, intergenerational fallout from slow violence. The task of thinking on such a geographical scale—let alone a temporal one—can seem overwhelming. Indeed, Wendell Berry has warned against the potentially debilitating effects of such large-scale approaches: "The adjective 'planetary' describes a problem in such a way that it cannot

be solved . . . The problems, if we describe them accurately, are all private and small."<sup>76</sup> I would argue, however, that although advocating personal environmental responsibility is essential, to shrink solutions to the level of the private and the small is evasive, even if it does constructively enhance one's sense of agency. Planetary problems—and transnational, national, and regional ones—cannot simply be resolved by the aggregated actions of responsible individuals. Institutional actions (and institutionalized inaction) have a profound impact on environmental outcomes, most blatantly in relation to climate change, which no collectivized ethical behavior can combat without backing from well-implemented transnational accords.

### Slow Violence and the Production of Doubt

The forces of inaction have deep pockets. Environmental activists face well-funded, well-organized interests that invest heavily in manufacturing and sustaining a culture of doubt around the science of slow violence, thereby postponing policies that would help rein in the long-term impacts of climate change in particular. A coalition of Big Oil, Big Coal, and Big Tobacco, led by ExxonMobil and Phillip Morris, has amassed an army of doubt-disseminators: lobbyists, political consultants, media plutocrats like Rupert Murdoch, right-wing think tanks, fake citizens' groups on Facebook, scholarly reviews of climate science written by non climate scientists, pseudo-scientific websites, university departments endowed to demonstrate conclusions friendly to Big Oil, Big Coal, and Big Tobacco and to sponsor uncertainty around climate change and, in the case of tobacco, uncertainty about the carcinogenic risks of second hand smoke.<sup>77</sup>

Despite the overwhelming, virtually unanimous, consensus among climate scientists that climate change is happening, is human-induced, is accelerating, and will have catastrophic consequences for human and much nonhuman life on earth, all the misnamed 'denialists' need do is keep ensuring that, in the public's mind, the jury remains permanently out, so that irresolution rules. This is the point underscored by a leaked memo from political consultant, Frank Luntz distributed to Republican activists during George W. Bush's presidency: "Should the public come to believe that the scientific issues are settled, their views about global warming will change accordingly. Therefore, you need to continue to make the lack of scientific

certainty a primary issue in the debate.<sup>78</sup> Or, to cite another memo: "Doubt is our product since it is the best means of competing with the 'body of fact' that exists in the mind of the general public. It is also the means of establishing a controversy."<sup>79</sup> Controversy, in turn, plays into the media's standard for-and-against formula for debate, even if that binary skews the consensus radically; even if, as in the case of anthropogenic climate change, 3,000 climate scientists confirm that it is happening and none deny it. The against position thus typically devolves to a right-wing activist with no peer-reviewed climate change publications.

In "Concerning Violence," the opening chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon writes of the role played under capitalism by an army of cultural "bewilderers."<sup>80</sup> The spread of slow violence in our own times has been exacerbated by a lavishly funded army of new bewilderers, those doubt producers and doubt disseminators whose job it is to maintain populist levels of uncertainty sufficient to guarantee inaction. We thus need to recognize that slow violence involves more than a perceptual problem created by the gap between destructive policies or practices and their deferred, invisible consequences. For in addition, slow violence provides prevaricative cover for the forces that have the most to profit from inaction: under cover of deferred consequences, these energetic new bewilderers literally buy time. For the new bewilderers, led by Big Oil and Big Coal, doubt is more than a state of mind—it's a bankable product. In this context, we should acknowledge the role played by a raft of public science writers who are writer-activists in their own way, figures like James Hoggan, Elizabeth Kolbert, Naomi Oreskes, Erik Conway, Andrew Rowell, Tim Flannery, David Michaels, and the incomparable George Monbiot who have followed the money and worked industriously to render visible the clandestine networks that finance doubt.<sup>81</sup>

### Of Vampire Squids and Resource Rebels

In 2009, amidst the global economic crash, Matt Taibbi memorably depicted Goldman Sachs as a "great vampire squid wrapped around the face of humanity, relentlessly jamming its blood funnel into anything that smells like money."<sup>82</sup> Within a year his deepwater image of life-sucking avarice would seem an uncanny foreshadowing of petroleum giant BP.

Indeed, Taibbi's vampire squid achieved such popular resonance, I would suggest, because it gave emotional definition to an age, over and above the tentacular reach of any specific transnational corporation. An era of imperial overreach has brought to crisis a Washington Consensus ideology premised on globalizing the "free market" through militarization, privatization, deregulation, optional corporate self-policing, the undertaxation of the super wealthy, ever-more arcane financial practices, and a widening divide separating the gated über-rich from the unhoused ultrapoor within and between nations.

Together these practices have heightened capitalism's innate tendency to abstract in order to extract, intensifying the distancing mechanisms that make the sources of environmental violence harder to track and multinational environmental answerability harder to impose. Such distancing mechanisms include the rhetorical gulf between development as a grand planetary dream premised on growth-driven consumption and its socioenvironmental fallout; the geographical distance between market forces as, to an almost occult degree, production has become disaggregated from consumption; and the temporal distance between short-lived actions and long-lived consequences, as gradual casualties are spread across a protracted aftermath, during which the memory and the body count of slow violence are diffused—and defused—by time.

Yet memory loss is unevenly inhabited. Whether through sustained activism or more sporadic protests, resource rebels and the environmentally disenfranchised have mobilized repeatedly against memory loss, refusing to see their long-term livelihoods abstracted into oblivion, be it through state violence, transnational corporate rapacity, or some combination of the two. The resource rebels who rise up (or dig in for the long haul) express ambitions that may be difficult to achieve but, in the scheme of things, are typically not grand: some shelter from the uncertainties of hunger; some basic honoring of established patterns of agroforestry, fishing, hunting, planting, and harvesting; access to clean water; some prospects for their children; some respect for the cultural (and therefore environmental) presence of the guiding dead. And, if one accepts as a given that traditions are always mutable, resource rebels seek some active participation in the speed and character of cultural change. Failing all that, the rebels may seek compensation directed not at the nation at large (always an unequal abstraction) but at

those most intimately affected by the defacement of the living land by the boardrooms of faceless profiteers.

The fraught issue of compensation connects directly with the infrastructural failures of the state: insurrectionary anger is repeatedly stoked when a community experiences technological modernization as extractive theft without service delivery. Under such circumstances, visible reminders of theft through modernity's infrastructural invasions—by oil pipelines or massive hydroelectric dams or toxic tailings from mines—foment rage at life-threatening environmental degradation combined with the state's failure to provide life-enabling public works.<sup>83</sup> Often, as a community contends with attritional assaults on its ecological networks, it isn't granted equitable access (or any access at all) to modernity's basic infrastructural networks—piped clean water, a sewage system, an electric grid, a public transport grid, or schools—utilities that might open up alternatives to destitution. Such communities, ecologically dispossessed without being empowered via infrastructure, are ripe for revolt. Like those Niger Delta villages where children for decades had no access to electricity for studying at night, while above their communities Shell's gas flares created toxic nocturnal illumination. Too dark for education, too bright for sleep: modernity's false dawn.

Writers who align themselves with resource rebellions may help render decipherable the illegible distance between a far-off neoliberal ideology and its long-lasting local fallout. Such writers may serve as *portes-paroles* in an economic order premised on acute inequities in portability—of commodities, factories, jobs, people, and the environment itself. Writer-activists may thereby help expose injustices arising from the global freedom of movement afforded powerful corporations and the Bretton Woods institutions, while swathes of humanity are so ecologically undermined that they are abandoned to the plight of the stationary displaced. Whether as part-instigators or as amplifiers, writer-activists can strive to advance the causes of those who confront turbo-capitalism's assaults on the resources that shape their survival. In confrontations between such typically unequal forces, determined hope is mixed with what John Berger, in the spirit of Antonio Gramsci, has called "undefeated despair."<sup>84</sup>

While honoring the writer's role, I wish to do so without glamorizing it. This role requires incessant compromise and incessant reinvention, particularly given the rapid changes in the technological and geopolitical climate

in which writers must act. I should note here that the events I engage in this book are clustered in the period from the early 1980s through the late-1990s—in what one might call neoliberalism's near present.<sup>85</sup> From the beginnings of the Reagan-Thatcher era through the Bhopal disaster, the collapse of communism and apartheid, the first Gulf War, the rise of the Save the Narmada Movement in India, the International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal, Delta's Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People in Nigeria, Kenya's Green Belt Movement, to *Acción Ecológica* in the Ecuadorian Amazon, the purview of *Slow Violence* predates two particularly significant environmental developments. First, the full-blown ascent of Chinese authoritarian capitalism, ushering in the Chimeric age as, through entangled rivalry, mutual dependence, and mutual mistrust, an emboldened China has joined an overstretched America as a global force in annexing—and carting off—the very conditions of life. We see this dramatically, for instance, in the 3-million-acre swathe of equatorial forest in the Democratic Republic of Congo that China has bought for a pittance to log and, once logged, has dedicated to monocultural palm oil production, thereby displacing and immiserating the forest's inhabitants. This is all integral to the second scramble for Africa, as the continent's resource maps are redrawn and its riches carved up among Chinese, American, European, Australian, and South African corporations typically working in cahoots with unelected officials or regional brigands. Africa may contain some of the most acute cases of such rampant disregard for socioenvironmental survival in the Chimeric age, but it is far from alone.

Alongside this geopolitical shift we are witnessing the most profound changes in centuries to the technological climate within which writer-activists must operate. In the era on which I focus, "text" was not yet a standard verb. Since then, proliferating nonprint platforms, an upsurge in new media networks, and digital immediacy have transformed the technological milieu within which oppression is inflicted and dissidence expressed—and within which speed is experienced. Among the writers I consider, Indra Sinha is by a long measure the most digitally attuned. His Bhopal novel, *Animal's People*, straddles two eras, as he reconfigures a cold-war event for a twenty-first century obsessed with virtual networks and biopolitics. Triggered by the 1984 Union Carbide disaster and the environmental justice movement that rose from its ashes, Sinha's 2007 fiction can be read as an experiment in linking the protest novel to digitally networked dissent.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, the public life

of *Animal's People* as a novel has been powerfully shaped by Sinha's mobile, multimedia approach: on his blog and Web site, for example, he mixes non-fictional testimony from Bhopal survivors with a sardonic visual-and-verbal fantasia of a poisoned city trying to rebrand itself as a tourist paradise.

If the quarter-century lag between the Union Carbide explosion and *Animal People's* appearance marks a shift from predigital to digital activism, the lag also allows Sinha to challenge the conventions of what constitutes a catastrophic event. For the explosion itself plays a relatively minor role in the novel; instead, Sinha focuses on the less obviously eventful aftermath, the slow violence that, by the novel's end, comes to be recognized as the event itself, a violence that has yet to run its course. It is to this novel and Bhopal that I now turn.

## I

### Slow Violence, Neoliberalism, and the Environmental Picaresque

It is only right, to my mind, that things so remarkable, which happen to have remained unheard and unseen until now, should be brought to the attention of many and not lie buried in the sepulcher of oblivion.

—Anonymous, *Lazarillo de Tormes*

A quarter century ago, Raymond Williams called for more novels that attend to “the close living substance” of the local while simultaneously tracing the “occluded relationships”—the vast transnational economic pressures, the labor and commodity dynamics—that invisibly shape the local.<sup>1</sup> To hazard such novels poses imaginative challenges of a kind that writers content to create what Williams termed “enclosed fictions” need never face, among them the challenge of rendering visible occluded, sprawling webs of interconnectedness. In our age of expanding and accelerating globalization, this particular imaginative difficulty has been cast primarily in spatial terms, as exemplified by John Berger's pronouncement, famously cited in Edward Soja's *Postmodern Geographies*: “Prophecy now involves a geographical rather than a historical projection; it is space and not time that hides consequences from us. To prophesy today it is only necessary to know men [and women] as they are throughout the world in all their inequality.”<sup>2</sup>